

Democracy as part of the EU's DNA in citizens' daily lives

How does EU democracy relate to citizens' daily lives?

What can we do to make EU democracy as lively and the voices of citizens as relevant as possible?

If there is a global benchmark that encapsulates the fundamental principles of democracy, then it is the European Union.

You have only to read Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union to see the principles on which it is based, which form its *raison d'être* and which we could call 'its DNA'. Those principles include respect for human dignity, freedom, equality, the rule of law, human rights and, of course, democracy.

It is democracy that is required of countries applying to join the EU, as determined by the 'Copenhagen criteria' since 1993, which require candidate countries to have 'institutions guaranteeing democracy'.

But what does democracy mean to Europeans?

According to the official website of the European Union:

'The functioning of the EU is founded on representative democracy. A European citizen automatically enjoys political rights. Every adult EU citizen has the right to stand as a candidate and to vote in elections to the European Parliament. EU citizens have the right to stand as a candidate and to vote in their country of residence, or in their country of origin.'

In its own words, the functioning of the EU is based on the election of our representatives. The rights of citizens to vote and to stand as candidates determine the idiosyncrasy, pillars and stability of the Europe that we know.

There are many reasons why citizens abstain, and it is precisely by analysing those reasons that we will find solutions. Inadequate communication channels, the apparent inaccessibility of our representatives, the complexity and quantity of information, and even misinformation are some of the reasons why Europeans do not turn out to vote.

Through education, correctly targeted information and the existence of channels for citizen engagement, a Europe with greater democratic participation is possible, in which citizens informed about the EU's work on their behalf can participate with the responsibility that fair and transparent European elections require. Because our most important exercise of democracy is through the ballot box.

Without doubt, the European Parliament is the most democratic institution in the EU. Its Members are elected to be the voice of the people, with their election being based on democratic principles. The European Parliament's commitment to democracy is such that, for over 30 years, it has been observing elections in countries that do not belong to the EU, by undertaking to support the holding of free and fair elections.

Elections to the European Parliament must be transparent and exemplary so that the democratic system accurately reflects the voice of the people. The Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations ensures that this is the case, by registering and monitoring the political parties that participate in elections.

It could be said that, as the root of everything that the European Union represents, elections to the European Parliament are an act of general public responsibility, in which we elect our representatives to defend the will of the European people.

How is it possible that European elections have abstention rates of more than 50%?

In 2021, our school was named as a 'European Parliament Ambassador School', and we have spent three intensive years highlighting the importance of the European institutions and explaining what it means to belong to the European Union.

When we carried out research into the reasons why Europeans do not vote, we found that the EU is viewed as an entity that is very remote from its citizens, who do not realise what the EU is doing for them on a daily basis.

Since the first European elections were held, turnout has consistently fallen while the legislative activity of the European Parliament to create a Europe for its citizens has increased. What is going wrong?

Citizens do not identify with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), whose busy schedules leave them with little time to talk to the people. We have found that they are approachable and that they want to talk about their work and the key issues that concern us. Over these three years, several MEPs have talked to us about geopolitics, equality and the new challenges of a digital Europe.

Efforts should be made in the short term, between now and the European elections, to shed light on the people behind the seats.

Misinformation is another great enemy of democracy. Official sources are often not consulted by the general public, who get their information through other channels whose thoroughness is questionable.

How can messages be efficiently delivered with their content intact?

The European Parliament holds workshops to counter misinformation, and the European Commission is implementing the European Democracy Action Plan.

In the long term, schools must offer lessons on how to combat misinformation.

Another factor that erodes democratic participation is disillusionment with everything politics-related. Scandals such as the recent 'Qatargate' undermine the value of the political function.

Politics is a necessary part of the exercise of public office, which has the ultimate goal of service. Our representatives must be exemplary in the exercise of their offices. The financing of political parties and political foundations must be transparent, as also the individual integrity of everyone involved in those groups.

In the short term, the fight against corruption must be exemplary, and, in the long term, improved control mechanisms should be established.

In addition, although messages are often true and messengers are exemplary and approachable, the problem is that they are not clear enough.

We call for simple and accessible information in a society where visuals are preferred over complicated legal texts or lengthy manifestos from each political party.

In the medium term, general information should be revised, and intuitive content and computer graphics should be created at a level appropriate to a public that is not always expert on such matters.

We have found that there is a general lack of knowledge about the constant role that the EU plays in our daily lives.

Such practical aspects as being able to use a single charger, roaming, European mobility programmes or product labelling are examples of how the European Union legislates for the people.

The European Parliament and the other European institutions and bodies are making huge efforts to publicise their work and achievements, but the information is not reaching society effectively.

People are not in the habit of consulting the official pages where these issues are discussed, and they are generally unaware of the offices which the European Union has to provide public information.

The Europe Direct Contact Centres, the European Documentation Centres and the Eurodesk centres have given us extensive support so that we could inform ourselves and actively participate.

In the short term, we would increase the information budget that these offices have, which we feel is currently very limited.

In the medium term, we propose that all information relevant to citizens should be made available through a single root website, with links to the various services and information that the EU offers.

We believe that there is a significant correlation between the presence of the European Union in school curricula and European democratic participation.

Although the European Union as a subject is not available throughout Spain, this is starting to be offered in some regions.

Educational programmes such as Erasmus+, eTwinning and European Parliament Ambassador Schools (EPAS) have a key role to play in the democracy training of young Europeans.

The Erasmus+ programme is perhaps the most visible tool that the European Union has developed to encourage European sentiment and publicise the tangible reality of the benefits that the European Union has to offer its citizens.

The European Commission is aware of the impact of such programmes, which have increased in importance and funding over the years of their operation.

The Ambassador School programme is the one working most intensively on values such as democratic participation. Every year, the national office of the European Parliament in Spain allows hundreds of students to travel to Strasbourg to experience a plenary session under the EuroSchool programme, which brings young people from all over Europe together with MEPs to talk about topical issues.

Out of all the activities in which we have participated as European Ambassadors, this is the one that has taught us the most about what democracy in Europe represents.

In the medium to long term, we propose that more lessons on Europe should be delivered through the curricula and through the European Education Area.

Pro-European associations such as ESN, Team Europe and BETA are working together to show how the institutions legislate for the people.

Thanks to BETA (winners of the European Charlemagne Youth Prize in 2022), we organised a simulation of European institutions.

In the medium term, we propose specific funding for this type of activity, and also the use in schools of materials such as the video game 'EUcraft' involving the Council of the EU, the role-playing game of the European Parliament, and the resources of the European Commission's Learning Corner.

We also propose more teaching of history so that democratic values can be highlighted.

One example of best practice is the activity that we carried out entitled 'Ambassadors of the Origin of Democracy', which has gained recognition and won several prizes. This activity celebrated the creation of the first parliament in history, right in our own country. The Cortes of León of 1188 marked the first time in history that the people were invited to decide on the rules by which they would be governed. Over one week, we organised living history days that received significant coverage in the media.

In the short term, we propose that the institutions provide information on the origin of democracy on some of the EU's official websites, for which we can offer all the game-based learning resources that we created for this purpose.

In addition to these suggestions for improvements that can be made by the European institutions, we have engaged in self-reflection, particularly on the initial question of 'What can we do to make EU democracy as lively as possible?'

What can we do?

Before answering this question, we need to understand the democratic process. There is a general lack of understanding in society about how citizens are represented in the EU.

As EU citizens, we can participate in our democracy either actively (by getting involved in political parties or association) or passively (by voting).

Our votes elect our representatives by universal suffrage, whether in the European Parliament or in our own national parliaments. It should not be forgotten that our votes in our national parliaments will determine the leaders who will appoint future national commissioners or who will take part in the Council of the EU, which is why the will of the people, expressed by voting, is reflected in the composition of the three main institutions of the European Union.

Citizens can currently contact their representatives directly – through the contact methods provided by the EU – or through other initiatives, such as the 'Conference on the Future of Europe', in which our school participated by offering suggestions in this citizen consultation organised by the Commission.

We would note that, since 2011, the EU has allowed people to submit a 'European citizens' initiative' as an instrument of participatory democracy through which, subject to certain requirements, we can invite the Commission to table a legislative proposal.

Another way of participating is through pro-European associations (some of which are mentioned above) and other organisations. We would highlight the 'European Youth Forum', which comprises all the youth organisations in Europe that represent the voice of young people in Europe.

For young people like us, competitions such as those organised by the APPF are important motivational initiatives that encourage us to learn more about the European democratic sentiment. This year, our school won a competition on Euro-activism and Youth Goals.

A proactive attitude is vital, which is why we have spent this year organising activities such as the ‘European elections workshop’, after realising that our peers did not know how to vote, leaving them unsure and disinterested. Our workshop has been on display in the European Parliament office in our country as an example of best practice.

As Europeans, we must encourage understanding of the purpose of our votes, by proposing citizens’ initiatives, participating in European consultations and forums, and proposing activities to help publicise European and democratic best practice.

The institutions can work along these same lines in the short, medium and long term, although citizens and institutions should work together.

The voices of citizens should be relevant and should be heard more often than every five years in the European elections. The European Ombudsman should also be given an expanded role.

There should be a timetable of meetings, if not binding then at least advisory, with various experts and representatives of civil society.

The EU is present in every detail of our lives, and we must make it more visible.

There are ways to participate and feel that Europe is listening to us. Now, we have only to listen to Europe and turn out to vote for the Europe that we all want.

DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

- <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en>
- <https://elections.europa.eu/en/>
- <https://www.appf.europa.eu/appf/en/home/the-authority>
- https://op.europa.eu/webpub/com/eu-and-me/en/HOW_IS_THE_EU_RELEVANT_TO_YOUR_DAILY_LIFE.html#Introduction
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